

COMMENTARY

NCORP

Partnerships Offer Opportunities for Domestic Preparedness

CHATTANOOGA, TENN.

On September 11, 2001, I was Governor of the Commonwealth of Virginia. On the morning of the terrorist attack at the World Trade Center, I was in the Executive Mansion on Capitol Square in Richmond. While preparing for the day's work, I turned on the television to see the first tower of the World Trade Center in flames. As my wife Roxane and I watched, the second plane crashed into the second tower, and like all of you, I knew the United States was under attack. At that instant, I activated the emergency operations center, sent a directive that any report of explosion or gunfire in Virginia was to be reported to the central operations headquarters, and activated the National Guard. By the time I crossed Capitol Square to my office, Virginia became the second state attacked that day, as a plane rammed into the Pentagon, killing 184 people.



JIM GILMORE

Over the next days, I worked with the local responder community and state officials to manage the fire and damage at the Pentagon. I visited the responders and Guardsmen at the Pentagon to demonstrate the Commonwealth's support for the rescue effort. I visited the injured in hospitals to learn about the care provided by emergency responders, doctors, and nurses. I addressed the citizenry to tell the public what steps were being taken, and to provide confidence that we were acting to keep the public safe in a time of uncertainty.

Ironically, in 1999, I had been named by the Clinton administration to chair the Congressional Advisory Panel to Assess Domestic Response Capabilities Involving Terrorism Involving Weapons of Mass Destruction. Our national commission had produced three reports prior to the attacks, and produced two more when Congress extended the commission's term after the attacks. In those reports, we assessed the threat, proposed a national strategy and the methods for dealing with terrorism, and warned against the dangers posed to our freedoms and way of life. Reports of the commission can be found on the RAND Corporation Web site (www.rand.org/nsrd/terrpanel). The commission realized the key role played by the state and local responders in meeting the domestic terrorist threat. The view of the commission was that no strategy for homeland security could work without a genuine partnership among federal, state, and local authorities and the private sector.

Responsibility Rests With People

Four years after the 9/11 attack, the federal government struggles to create an overarching framework and national strategy against domestic terrorism. The truth is that the federal government has its own responsibilities to deal with: border control, intelligence reorganization, air-travel security, and immigration issues. It cannot, and should not, be expected to control and prepare every community in the United States against terrorist attack. It is not the federal government's responsibility—it is our responsibility to begin this initiative. Ours and no one else's.

As former chairman of the congressional panel, I want to work together with all state and local leaders, private companies, and community leaders to further the preparedness of the United States in this time of threat. That is why I have formed the National Council for Readiness and Preparedness (NCORP), to help provide a framework for local initiative. We need a national umbrella organization to establish a template for community preparedness.

A forum is needed to coordinate the many initiatives and organizations springing up nationwide to make plans and set priorities. As you read this column I am in Chattanooga at the invitation of the Tennessee Valley Corridor—a regional consortium of Virginia, Alabama, Kentucky, and Tennessee that will work with private sector, local mayors, responders, and congressional leaders to begin this initiative.

There can be no doubt of the need for such a national organization. While some coordination and planning now exists among the federal government, state, and localities, and among localities, more partnership is needed among the thousands of communities across the nation. There is a need for a clearinghouse of ideas, a need to settle on a national set of priorities to guide spending and training. There is a need for a vehicle to facilitate partnership with the Department of Homeland Security. And there is a need to provide assurances to all of the people of the United States that the local and state responders are organized and coordinated for any attack. Such assurance reduces the risk of overreaction that could lead to an unwise or reckless response, the loss of life, wasted taxpayer money, or the diminution of our civil freedoms.

Communities Must Work Together

NCORP is for everyone concerned about the protection of his or her community and family should an attack occur. I invite you to join this national effort.

What recently happened in New Orleans and the Gulf Coast—an event of mass casualties, death, and destruction, whether by God or by humans illustrates how vitally important it is for our communities and nation to be prepared. Americans have always responded to adversity. Much remains to be done in America's domestic and foreign policy. First, let's organize a national program to help meet the terrorist threat. No plan or security structure can preserve us from all threats. But we can achieve the knowledge that we are as ready as we possibly can be and that we are all in it together. Then we can move on—unafraid to meet the additional challenges facing our nation.

■ *Jim Gilmore, who led the Congressional Advisory Panel to Assess Domestic Response Capabilities Involving Terrorism Involving Weapons of Mass Destruction, served as Governor of Virginia from 1998 until 2002. NCORP may be accessed on the Internet at www.ncorp.org.*

